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PARENTING FROM PRISON: PERCEPTIONS OF INCARCERATED PARENTS'
ABILITY AND INFLUENCE

THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Science in
Family Sciences in the College of Agriculture, Food and Environment
at the University of Kentucky

By

Gabrielle Hadorn

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Jason Hans, Professor of Family Sciences

Lexington, Kentucky

2020

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

PARENTING FROM PRISON: PERCEPTIONS OF INCARCERATED PARENTS' ABILITY AND INFLUENCE

Incarcerated parents are at a substantially higher risk for losing their legal right to parent than the general public. This study assessed implicit perceptions and biases that may play a role in these legal decisions, specifically the perceptions of incarcerated parents' ability to parent and influence their children's lives. Court appointed special advocate (CASA) volunteers' (N = 242) perceptions of incarcerated parents based on the parents' personal characteristics, characteristics of their children, and characteristics of their criminal activity were assessed through a true-experiment design. Ordinal regression analyses revealed that age of child, level of violence in the crime committed, and criminal history are all relevant factors in assessing parental ability and influence. Additionally, patterns were found in respondents' open-ended responses suggesting that racial and gender bias may also play a role, despite the statistical nonsignificance of close-ended responses. Implications and future directions are discussed.

KEYWORDS: Incarceration, Parental Ability, Parental Influence, Bias

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08/21/2020

PARENTING FROM PRISON: PERCEPTIONS OF INCARCERATED PARENTS'
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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

The prison system in the United States is growing at an exponential rate, with nearly three million Americans incarcerated today—over two-thirds of whom are parents of minor children (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). More than ten million living Americans have experienced parental incarceration at some point during their childhood (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Because incarcerated parents are physically absent and unable to make financial or interpersonal contributions to their children on a day-to-day basis, other caregivers are needed to provide stability during parental incarceration (Halter, 2018). Approximately 1 in 8 incarcerated parents lose their parental rights, stripping thousands of children of a connection to one or both of their birth parents (Hernández & Berrick, 2019; Mitchell, 2012). These children are often placed with other family members, but approximately 20% are placed into the foster care system, after which parents tend not to regain custody, even after the parent's release from prison (Mitchell, 2012).

Despite the practical and logistical challenges associated with parenting from prison, the legal removal of parental rights might do more harm than good for both the parent and child. For incarcerated parents, declines in mental health experienced while imprisoned are believed to be due in part to their poor relationships with their children during incarceration (Halter, 2018). This, in turn, supports the commonly held belief among inmates that they are inadequate as parents and that their children would therefore be better off if they withdraw from their parental role (Allen, Flaherty, & Elly, 2010; Swanson, Lee, Sansone, & Tatum, 2013; Tripp, 2001). Parents of children placed in the foster care system are often prohibited from contacting their children. However, legal separation of families is associated with diminished mental health and behavioral

outcomes of both the parent and child (Fasah, 2018; Halter, 2018), suggesting that despite the lack of physical presence, there may be a sound argument for allowing incarcerated parents to retain legal ties to their children.

In the past decade alone, over 32,000 incarcerated parents in the United States have been stripped of their parental rights without being accused of physical or sexual abuse, or struggling with drugs or alcohol—nearly 5,000 of those decisions were based solely on the parent being incarcerated (Iskikian, 2019). With incarcerated parents losing their legal right to parent minor children at a substantially higher rate than the general public, but often with little to no evidence that this practice is, in fact, in the best interest of these children, further research is needed to better understand the circumstances leading to this mass removal of parental rights (Vesneski, 2011). In the present study, a multiple-segment factorial vignette will be employed to empirically examine whether biases according to some key contextual variables exist concerning (a) the ability of incarcerated individuals to parent or (b) the perceived appropriateness of them retaining influence in their children’s lives while incarcerated.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Contextual Factors

Incarcerated parents are at a much higher risk for having their parental rights removed than any other population (Vesneski, 2011), and the literature shows demographic disparities indicating that some groups within the incarcerated population are at an even more elevated risk than others of losing parental rights. Characteristics of the incarcerated parent, their child, and their criminal activity have all been cited in recent years as grounds for the termination of incarcerated parents’ rights (Child Welfare

Information Gateway, 2017; Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Accordingly, this study has been designed to identify any implicit attitudes or biases that may be present in those assessments, particularly with regard to the incarcerated parent's race and gender, their child's age and gender, the type of crime committed, and the parent's history of incarceration.

2.1.1 Race

African Americans are incarcerated at a higher rate than other racial groups—for example, 1 in 10 Black children have at least one incarcerated parent whereas 1 in 60 White children have the same (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Incarcerated African American and Hispanic parents are, respectively, the two racial or ethnic groups most likely to have their parental rights terminated (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017; Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). These disparities along racial/ethnic lines tend to be attributed to disparities in the racial/ethnic makeup of the general prison population (Iskikian, 2019), but no published research has specifically examined the role that race or ethnicity plays in attitudes toward the termination of parental rights.

2.1.2 Gender of Parent

Although men are imprisoned at nearly ten times the rate of women, female prisoners lose their parental rights much more frequently (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Halter (2018) suggested that this gender disparity may be particularly prevalent when the child is less than 2 years of age due to a generally held belief that young children need a stable maternal figure at that age more so than a stable paternal figure. The thinking seems to be that removing the biological mother's legal rights provides an opportunity for the child to be placed in the care of a more secure maternal figure; however, that often

does not occur: Many children age out of the foster care system without ever being adopted (Arditti, 2016; Halter, 2018).

2.1.3 Age of Child

In the event of parental incarceration, many children are temporarily placed in foster care if there is not an additional biological parent able to immediately care for the child (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019). The federal Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 requires that states file petitions to terminate parental rights when children have been in foster care for 15 of the previous 22 months (Macomber, 2009). Many states have gone beyond this to specify shorter time limits for younger children, for example, the petition for termination of rights for any child under 3 years of age who has been in foster care for 6 months is required in nine states (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019). This, in turn, leaves incarcerated parents of younger children at a higher risk for termination of their parental rights than those of older children.

2.1.4 Gender of Child

Boys are removed from their parents' care more frequently than girls, across all age groups, with approximately 10% more boys than girls in the foster care system (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). Given men's propensity to be incarcerated at a higher rate than women—93% of inmates in the federal prison system are men—the removal of parental rights to boys more than girls following parental incarceration may be an attempt to prevent the intergenerational transmission of a mindset or pattern of behavior that would set boys on a developmental trajectory toward crime (Harris-Mckoy, Meyer, Mcwey, & Henderson, 2014). That is, boys are at a much greater risk than girls for becoming involved with the criminal justice system as the age, which may lower the

threshold for employing extreme protective measures with boys relative to girls among those in home environments that place them at elevated risk of delinquent behavior (Harris-Mckoy, Meyer, Mcwey, & Henderson, 2014).

2.1.5 Type of Crime

The pattern of terminated parental rights reflects the characteristics of parents and children more so than the characteristics of the criminal activity itself (Iskikian, 2019). Many states enforce the termination of rights in the case of any felony conviction resulting in long-term incarceration (which is variably defined across states to range from two years to a life sentence), particularly for crimes of violence against the child or other family members (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). However, there have been thousands of cases in which parents were stripped of their parental rights following incarceration for non-violent crimes when serving sentences as short as one year (Iskikian, 2019; Vesneski, 2011).

2.1.6 Incarceration History

Parents' criminal records are available to the court in termination of parental rights hearings, but the court is instructed to consider criminal history only to the extent that it is substantially related to parenting ability (Simmons & Danker-Feldman, 2010). Just as the length of one's incarceration corresponds to some degree with the type of crime committed and its impact, the overall length of time a parent has been and is expected to be incarcerated corresponds to some degree with the decision of whether to terminate or maintain an incarcerated parent's parental rights while incarcerated. Although there is greater stigma associated with repeat criminal offenders than with first-time offenders, many incarcerated parents do lose their parental rights following their

first conviction (Harris-Mckoy, Meyer, Mcwey, & Henderson, 2014; Vesneski, 2011), indicating that a pattern of repeated incarceration is not a necessary precursor to the termination of parental rights.

2.2 Maintaining Parent–Child Relationships

Incarcerated parents who are serving lengthy sentences but maintain physical contact with their children tend to have better outcomes throughout their time in prison and demonstrate more positive perceptions of their overall relationships with their children and with other family members than those who do not maintain physical contact or whose parental rights have been removed entirely (Brunton-Smith & McCarthy, 2017; Lee, Sansone, Swanson, & Tatum, 2012). Additionally, the level of support felt by incarcerated parents from either their partner or their children is positively correlated to their outcomes post release, likely due to continued support and understanding once reintroduced to their lives outside of prison (Meyers, Wright, Young, & Tasca, 2017). Evidence shows that if both parent and child are able to maintain family ties and contact with family members, there are potential benefits for both parties.

2.3 The Present Study

Despite extant research demonstrating numerous benefits for both parents and children when family systems are left intact during periods of incarceration, many parents are nonetheless stripped of their legal rights to their children. With often little evidence for this removal of rights other than incarceration status (Iskikian, 2019), research is needed to assess whether these decisions are truly made in the best interest of these children, or are the result of bias against these parents. The present study was designed to identify whether the design variables have an impact on the stereotyping of incarcerated

parents, their ability to parent, and their perceived influence in their children's lives using a multiple-segmented factorial vignette design with a sample of court-appointed special advocate (CASA) volunteers, who play a formal role in advocating for the best interests of children whose parents are in the court system (see www.nationalcasagal.org). I hypothesized that participants would favor less parental influence and intuit poorer parenting quality for (a) incarcerated Black and Hispanic parents than incarcerated White parents, (b) incarcerated mothers than incarcerated fathers, (c) incarcerated parents of a boy than incarcerated parents of a girl, (d) infants than school-age or teenage children of incarcerated parents, (e) those convicted of violent than non-violent crimes, and (f) repeat offenders than first offenders.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

Multiple segment factorial vignettes (MSFVs) are a combination of the expanded vignette approach and factorial surveys, and allow empirical examination of attitudes, beliefs, or judgments regarding topics that might otherwise be difficult to study for a multitude of reasons (Ganong & Coleman, 2006). By integrating the random assignment element of experimental designs and the exploratory approach of qualitative research, MSFVs allow researchers to investigate biases by randomly assigning participants to hypothetical conditions, thereby directly assessing factors that could otherwise only be indirectly assessed (Ganong & Coleman, 2006). With this approach, participants are presented with a short, hypothetical story in thoughtfully constructed segments. The occurrence and timing of variables is manipulated across these segments to provide observations of how participants' attitudes, beliefs, or judgments change as the story evolves or as more information is revealed (Ganong & Coleman, 2006).

3.1 Sampling Procedures

An a priori statistical power analysis using G*Power (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007)—based on a two-tailed test with an alpha (α) of .05, a beta (β) of .20, an outcome probability of .40, and a small effect size (odds ratio) of 2.0 (Ferguson, 2009)—yielded a recommended usable sample size of 224. CASA volunteers were recruited through a two-step recruitment process. First, CASA program administrators from several hundred local programs across the United States were contacted in the spring of 2020 by either phone or email to request that they forward the study information to the volunteers in their program. Volunteers within the programs whose administrators chose to cooperate (it is unknown how many did so) were then offered the opportunity to participate as individuals. The only inclusion criteria required participants to be active CASA volunteers and at least 18 years of age.

3.1.1 Sample Characteristics

Using this procedure, a total sample of 242 CASA volunteers completed the survey. Respondents were between 22 and 85 years of age ($M = 54.21$, $SD = 15.60$), the majority of whom identified as female (80.7%) and White (76.4%). Experience levels varied from less than 1 year to 28 years as a CASA volunteer ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 4.34$). The majority of respondents had at least one child themselves (79.8%). A very small percentage had been convicted of either a misdemeanor (4.5%) or felony (0.5%) themselves, but 35.9% had someone in their family convicted of a misdemeanor and 24.4% had someone convicted of a felony.

3.2 Designs and Procedures

In accordance with procedures approved by the University of Kentucky's Institutional Review Board, informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to starting the survey. Six variables were randomly manipulated in a 3 x 2 x 2 x 3 x 2 x 2 three-segment factorial vignette designed to assess factors that might impact the decision-making process concerning whether to terminate parental rights following a parent's incarceration: incarcerated parent's race, incarcerated parent's gender, child's gender, child's age, level of violence in the crime committed, and criminal history. Each participant was randomly assigned to read one of the 144 versions of the vignette depicting different combinations of the randomly manipulated variables over three segments. Each segment was followed by three questions designed to assess the degree to which respondents believed the parent depicted in the vignette was capable as a parent and should remain involved in their child's life.

3.2.1 Segment 1

The first segment of the vignette depicted a parent recently sentenced to serve time in prison. The race and gender of the parent was randomly manipulated to describe him or her as Black, Hispanic, or White mother or father. To avoid the awkwardness of explicitly identifying the parent's race, which might have alerted respondents to this experimental condition, the parent's name was adjusted to convey a particular racial heritage and the parent was visually depicted in a photo that accompanied the vignette (see Appendix A; Ma, Correll, & Wittenbrink, 2015). Specifically, respondents read the following as Segment 1 of the vignette (bold indicates randomly-selected design variables and italics represent words determined by the design variable presented):

Andre/Juan/James/Desiree/Carmen/Sarah [pictorially depicted as a *Black/Hispanic/White male/female*] was recently sentenced to serve up to 10 years in prison. *He/She* has a child at home with whom *he/she* has maintained a typical parent–child relationship thus far. *Andre/Juan/James/Desiree/Carmen/Sarah* has never been in trouble with any authorities for *his/her* parental role—but due to *his/her* lengthy incarceration, *he/she* will likely soon face a legal hearing to determine whether or not *his/her* parental rights will be terminated.

After reading the scenario, participants were asked two close-ended questions: (1) “To what extent do you believe *Andre/Juan/James/Desiree/Carmen/Sarah* could be a capable parent while in prison?” and (2) “How much influence do you think *Andre/Juan/James/Desiree/Carmen/Sarah* should have in *his/her* child’s life while in prison?” Then respondents were asked to, “Please briefly explain in your own words why you chose these answers.”

3.2.2 Segment 2

The second vignette segment revealed more details about the child by randomly manipulating his or her gender (boy, girl) and age (2-, 7-, or 14-year-old). Participants read,

A year has gone by since *Andre/Juan/James/Desiree/Carmen/Sarah*’s sentencing and *he/she* is now in the midst of *his/her* parental rights hearing. When going through the details of the case, the judge makes note that *Andre/Juan/James/Desiree/Carmen/Sarah*’s child is a **boy/girl** and was **2/7/14** years old at the time of *his/her* arrest.

After reading this segment, participants were asked: (1) “Given this additional information, to what extent do you believe *Andre/Juan/James/Desiree/Carmen/Sarah* could be a capable parent while in prison?” and (2) “How much influence do you think *Andre/Juan/James/Desiree/Carmen/Sarah* should have in *his/her* child’s life while in prison?” Then respondents were asked to, “Please briefly explain in your own words why you chose these answers.”

3.2.3 Segment 3

The final segment presented more information about the crime committed (violent, non-violent) and the parent’s criminal history (first time or not first time incarcerated). Specifically, participants read,

More information surfaces in this hearing from
Andre/Juan/James/Desiree/Carmen/Sarah’s conviction; *he/she* was convicted for a **non-violent/violent** crime related to the distribution of drugs. You also discover that this **is/is not** *his/her* first time in prison.

After reading this vignette segment, respondents again were asked, (1) “With this additional information, to what extent do you believe *Andre/Juan/James/Desiree/Carmen/Sarah* could be a capable parent while in prison?” and (2) “How much influence do you think *Andre/Juan/James/Desiree/Carmen/Sarah* should have in *his/her* child’s life while in prison?” Finally, they were asked to, “Please briefly explain in your own words why you chose these answers.”

After the vignette, participants were asked to complete a standard demographic questionnaire by reporting characteristics of themselves such as age, race, gender, and education level (see Appendix B). Items were also included to assess the participants’

own history and familiarity with the criminal justice system as well as criminal history in their own immediate family.

3.3 Analytical Approach

The two close-ended questions asked following each vignette segment—one measuring perceptions of parental capacity while incarcerated and one measuring perceptions of appropriate parental influence during incarceration—served as dependent variables for two ordinal regression models assessing the main effects of the six independent design variables manipulated in the vignette. The open-ended rationales for responses following the close-ended questions were coded inductively, meaning the codes emerged from the responses provided by the participants. Specifically, a primary coder first categorized responses into mutually exclusive codes, using a thought phrase as the unit of analysis, meaning each full rationale could be categorized into multiple codes. A codebook (see Appendix C) was created to provide a clear description of each code, ensuring consistency throughout the coding process. A second researcher then used the codebook to independently code half of the responses to assess interrater reliability. This process resulted in a moderate degree of agreement between coders ($\kappa = .63$; McHugh, 2012).

CHAPTER 4. RESULTS

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics for responses following the final segment of the vignette are shown in Table 1. These findings indicated that across nearly all independent variable groupings, respondents reported incarcerated mothers to be less capable as parents than incarcerated fathers. However, that same pattern is not reflected in respondents'

suggested level of parental influence, as that data showed more variability between parent gender groups. Additionally, respondents suggested greater levels of parental influence for first-time offenders than repeat offenders across all versions of the hypothetical parent presented; however, the data for parental capability showed more variation.

4.2 Perceived Parental Capability

Results of the ordinal logistic regression analyses predicting the respondent's perception of parental capability while in prison are displayed in Table 2. The analyses revealed that, after learning the incarcerated parent's race and gender in the first vignette segment, there were differences in the level of perceived capability to parent while in prison based on whether the respondents were parents themselves. Specifically, respondents were more likely to report a higher level of parental capability if they themselves had children ($OR = 2.11, p = .029$). Specific to the hypothetical incarcerated individual portrayed in the vignette, no statistical differences were found in one's perceived ability to parent from prison based on the parent's sex (male vs. female) or race—that is, neither Black nor Hispanic parents were seen as more or less capable of parenting from prison than White parents.

After learning of the child's age and gender in the second vignette segment, compared to those who read about a 2-year-old child, respondents were statistically more likely to report a higher level of parental capability while in prison if they read about an incarcerated parent with a 14- ($OR = 2.66, p = .004$) or a 7-year-old child ($OR = 3.83, p < .001$) than were those who read about a 2-year-old child. There were no statistical differences in responses between those who read about the incarcerated parent having a son versus a daughter.

After reading the third vignette segment, respondents who read that the crime committed by the parent was violent in nature tended to report lower levels of parental capability while in prison than did those who read that the crime was non-violent ($OR = 0.57, p = .037$). No statistical differences were found in responses between those who read about repeat offenders versus those convicted of a crime for the first time.

4.3 Suggested Parental Influence

The results of the ordinal logistic regression analyses predicting respondents' suggested parental influence while in prison are displayed in Table 3. No statistical differences were found in responses according to the incarcerated parent's sex or racial/ethnic background. After learning of the child's age and sex in the second vignette segment, respondents who read about older children tended to suggest a higher level of parental influence than did those who read about a 2-year-old child, but the differences were only statistically significant for those who read about a 7-year-old child ($OR = 2.20, p = .012$). No statistical differences were found in suggested levels of parental influence between those who read about sons versus daughters.

After reading the third vignette segment, respondents who read about parents convicted of a violent crime tended to suggest lower levels of parental influence than did those who read about parents convicted of a non-violent crime ($OR = 0.51, p = .012$). Additionally, respondents who read about repeat-offender parents tended to suggest lower levels of parental influence for than did those who read about a parent convicted for the first time ($OR = 0.51, p = .011$).

4.4 Rationales for Perceptions of Parental Capability and Influence

After each vignette segment, respondents were asked to explain their perceptions of the incarcerated parent's parental capability and parental influence. The distribution of these rationales is summarized in Table 4. After learning of the incarcerated parent's race/ethnicity and gender in the first vignette segment, the most common rationales for responses were related to (a) communication and visitation, (b) physical presence, and (c) importance of the parent-child relationship. After learning of the child's gender and age in the second vignette segment, the most common responses were related to (a) child's age, (b) physical presence, and (c) communication and visitation. Finally, after learning the offense's level of violence and the incarcerated parent's criminal history, the most common responses were related to (a) number of offenses, (b) opportunity for a second chance or rehabilitation, (c) violence of the crime, (d) the parent's character or judgment, and (e) involvement with drugs.

Although the majority of the open-ended responses did not vary considerably based on the incarcerated parent's individual characteristics, there were several notable differences. The most common responses given by respondents who read about incarcerated mothers related to the violence of their crime and number of past offenses, whereas the most common response given by those who read about incarcerated fathers related to their opportunity for a second chance or rehabilitation. Among respondents who read about a White parent, 15% stated they were concerned with the parent's character or judgment, whereas only 6% of respondents who read about a Hispanic parent and 3% who read about a Black parent stated the same. Additionally, 28% of respondents who read about a Black parent cited the importance of the parent-child relationship,

compared to 22% of respondents who read about a Hispanic parent and only 15% of those who read about a White parent.

Table 1. *Mean (and Standard Deviation) of Responses by Level of Each Independent Variable Following Vignette Segment 3 (N = 242)*

	Father			Mother		
	Black	Hispanic	White	Black	Hispanic	White
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
Parental capability						
Child gender						
Boy	1.19 (1.05)	1.05 (0.81)	1.42 (0.79)	1.05 (0.67)	1.11 (0.76)	0.96 (0.81)
Girl	1.00 (0.82)	1.33 (0.57)	1.08 (0.67)	0.88 (0.63)	0.77 (0.69)	0.86 (0.57)
Child age						
2 years	0.70 (0.68)	1.00 (0.68)	1.11 (0.78)	0.83 (0.62)	0.83 (0.72)	0.47 (0.52)
7 years	1.40 (1.12)	1.20 (0.63)	1.67 (0.82)	1.24 (0.66)	0.85 (0.56)	1.14 (0.66)
14 years	1.00 (0.00)	1.33 (0.73)	1.11 (0.60)	0.75 (0.71)	1.07 (0.88)	1.13 (0.72)
Crime						
Non-violent	1.07 (0.83)	1.30 (0.70)	1.17 (0.84)	1.00 (0.69)	1.17 (0.71)	1.17 (0.70)
Violent	1.13 (1.60)	1.09 (0.68)	1.33 (0.65)	0.95 (0.67)	0.73 (0.70)	0.62 (0.59)
History						
First offense	0.92 (1.00)	1.25 (0.74)	1.29 (0.73)	0.86 (0.71)	1.00 (0.76)	1.00 (0.71)
Repeat offender	1.24 (0.90)	1.14 (0.66)	1.20 (0.79)	1.10 (0.63)	0.83 (0.71)	0.83 (0.70)
Parental influence						
Child gender						
Boy	1.44 (1.09)	1.00 (1.00)	1.42 (0.79)	1.14 (0.73)	1.17 (0.86)	1.38 (1.01)
Girl	1.08 (0.86)	1.67 (0.87)	1.25 (0.62)	1.09 (0.81)	1.27 (0.88)	1.05 (0.74)
Child age						
2 years	0.80 (1.03)	1.21 (0.98)	0.89 (0.60)	0.94 (0.80)	1.25 (0.75)	0.87 (0.83)
7 years	1.60 (0.99)	1.30 (0.95)	1.83 (0.75)	1.53 (0.72)	1.38 (0.87)	1.36 (0.75)
14 years	1.25 (0.50)	1.48 (1.03)	1.44 (0.53)	0.75 (0.71)	1.07 (0.96)	1.44 (1.03)
Crime						
Non-violent	1.21 (0.89)	1.48 (0.95)	1.50 (0.67)	1.05 (0.72)	1.33 (0.77)	1.58 (0.83)
Violent	1.33 (1.11)	1.23 (1.02)	1.17 (0.72)	1.24 (0.89)	1.14 (0.94)	0.81 (0.81)
History						
First offense	1.33 (1.07)	1.50 (0.93)	1.57 (0.65)	1.14 (0.94)	1.32 (0.89)	1.52 (0.93)
Repeat offender	1.24 (0.97)	1.19 (1.03)	1.00 (0.67)	1.14 (0.66)	1.11 (0.83)	0.96 (0.81)

Table 2. *Ordinal Logistic Regression Predicting Parent's Capability (N = 242)*

Predictor	Segment 1					Segment 2					Segment 3				
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>OR</i>	95% CI	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>OR</i>	95% CI	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>OR</i>	95% CI
IV1: Black ^(White)	0.06	0.49	.904	1.06	[.40, 2.78]	-0.08	0.50	.880	0.93	[0.35, 2.47]	-0.40	0.49	.416	0.67	[0.25, 1.76]
IV1: Hispanic ^(White)	0.06	0.48	.894	1.07	[.42, 2.73]	-0.05	0.48	.922	0.95	[0.37, 2.46]	-0.27	0.47	.576	0.77	[0.30, 1.94]
IV2: Female ^(male)	0.29	0.31	.356	1.33	[.73, 2.44]	0.60	0.32	.056	1.83	[0.98, 3.39]	0.50	0.31	.103	1.65	[0.90, 3.03]
IV3: Son ^(daughter)						0.10	0.27	.703	1.11	[0.65, 1.89]	0.16	0.27	.555	1.17	[0.69, 1.99]
IV4: 14-year-old ^(2-year-old)						0.98	0.34	.004	2.66	[1.36, 5.20]	0.74	0.33	.025	2.09	[1.10, 3.99]
IV4: 7-year-old ^(2-year-old)						1.34	0.34	.000	3.83	[1.97, 7.46]	0.99	0.33	.002	2.70	[1.42, 5.12]
IV5: Violent offense ^(non-violent offense)											-0.56	0.27	.037	0.57	[0.34, 0.97]
IV6: Repeat offense ^(first offense)											-0.07	0.26	.795	0.93	[0.56, 1.57]
Respondent characteristics															
Has children ^(no children)	0.75	0.34	.029	2.11	[1.08, 4.14]	0.46	0.35	.187	1.58	[0.80, 3.11]	0.18	0.34	.607	1.19	[0.61, 2.32]
Family misdemeanor ^(no experience)	-0.33	0.34	.335	0.64	[0.25, 1.62]	-0.23	0.34	.504	0.80	[0.41, 1.56]	0.01	0.34	.977	1.01	[0.52, 1.95]
Family felony ^(no experience)	0.08	0.37	.832	1.08	[0.52, 2.25]	0.12	0.38	.752	0.89	[0.42, 1.88]	-0.23	0.38	.541	0.79	[0.38, 1.66]

Note. Reference category in parentheses. CI = confidence interval for odds ratio (*OR*).

Table 3. *Ordinal Logistic Regression Predicting Parent's Influence* (N = 242)

Predictor	Segment 1					Segment 2					Segment 3				
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>OR</i>	95% CI	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>OR</i>	95% CI	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>OR</i>	95% CI
IV1: Black ^(White)	-0.45	0.47	.344	0.64	[0.25, 1.62]	-0.31	0.48	.515	0.73	[0.29, 1.87]	-0.31	0.49	.530	0.74	[0.28, 1.91]
IV1: Hispanic ^(White)	-0.19	0.46	.688	0.83	[0.34, 2.05]	0.00	0.46	1.000	1.00	[0.41, 2.47]	-0.16	0.47	.738	0.86	[0.34, 2.14]
IV2: Female ^(male)	-0.17	0.30	.576	0.85	[0.47, 1.52]	0.09	0.30	.775	1.09	[0.61, 1.96]	0.07	0.30	.814	1.07	[0.59, 1.94]
IV3: Son ^(daughter)						-0.02	0.26	.937	0.98	[0.59, 1.63]	-0.11	0.26	.670	0.89	[0.53, 1.50]
IV4: 14-year-old ^(2-year-old)						0.57	0.32	.072	1.77	[0.95, 3.31]	0.56	0.32	.081	1.76	[0.93, 3.31]
IV4: 7-year-old ^(2-year-old)						0.79	0.31	.012	2.20	[1.19, 4.07]	1.05	0.32	.001	2.87	[1.53, 5.39]
IV5: Violent offense ^(non-violent offense)											-0.67	0.27	.012	0.51	[0.30, 0.86]
IV6: Repeat offense ^(first offence)											-0.67	0.26	.011	0.51	[0.30, 0.86]
Respondent characteristics															
Has children ^(no children)	-0.02	0.33	.959	0.98	[0.52, 1.86]	-0.16	0.33	.625	0.85	[0.45, 1.62]	-0.64	0.33	.057	0.53	[0.27, 1.02]
Family misdemeanor ^(no experience)	0.12	0.32	.708	1.13	[0.60, 2.13]	0.18	0.33	.570	1.20	[0.64, 2.28]	0.50	0.33	.135	1.64	[0.86, 3.14]
Family felony ^(no experience)	0.17	0.36	.626	1.19	[0.59, 2.41]	0.10	0.36	.789	1.10	[0.54, 2.24]	-0.58	0.37	.121	0.56	[0.27, 1.16]

Note. Reference category in parentheses. CI = confidence interval for odds ratio (*OR*).

Table 4. *Open-Ended Responses* (N = 122)

	Segment 1		Segment 2		Segment 3	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Communication and visitation	43	35	19	16	10	8
Physical presence	31	25	20	16	4	3
Importance of parent–child relationship	27	22	16	13	8	7
Relationship before incarceration	16	13	6	5	2	2
Alternative guardian	12	10	9	7	2	2
General parenting ability	10	8	4	3	6	5
Child's age	9	7	39	32	5	4
Love and emotional support	9	7	7	6	3	3
Crime unrelated to child	9	7	2	2	3	3
Still a parent	9	7	6	5	4	3
Parent's character or judgment	9	7	9	7	17	14
Decision-making	7	6	4	3	5	4
Stability or permanency	7	6	6	5	4	3
Sentence length	7	6	12	10	3	3
Opportunity for second chance or rehabilitation	5	4	1	1	18	15
Child's needs	4	3	7	6	3	3
Unknown motivation for crime	4	3	3	2	3	3
Number of offense	3	2	0	0	18	15
Setting an example of what not to do	2	2	8	7	7	6
Violence of crime	0	0	3	2	17	14
Child or parent's sex	0	0	3	2	0	0
Not a good influence	0	0	2	2	5	4
Involvement with drugs	0	0	0	0	15	13
Child knowing parent cares	0	0	6	5	3	3

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to better understand perceptions of parental capability and parental influence among incarcerated parents based on their race, gender, their child's gender and age, the level of violence in the crime committed, and their criminal history. Some statistical differences were found in the perceived level of parental capability and parental influence based on characteristics of the incarcerated parent and their child, as well as characteristics of the respondents. Additionally, there were notable differences observed in the open-ended responses based on the personal characteristics of the incarcerated parent. However, these data did not provide sufficient evidence to fully support most of the study's empirically-derived hypotheses.

The first segment of the vignette was designed to investigate the role race and gender play in the perception of parental capability and influence. Although there were no statistically significant differences based on these personal characteristics of the incarcerated parent, the open-ended responses suggested that there may be more bias involved than reported through the close-ended questions given that incarcerated mothers evoked different rationales than incarcerated fathers. Similarly, rationales among those who read about Black and Hispanic parents differed in some ways from those who read about White parents.

Through the informed consent process, participants were made aware that the purpose of the study was to identify factors that might impact the decision-making process concerning whether or not to terminate parental rights following a parent's incarceration. Although they were not informed which specific factors would be manipulated in the vignettes, some participants may have suspected race and gender to be

two of those variables, simply because they were the two most prominent presented in the first vignette segment. Because racial and gender biases have negative connotations, participants aware of these variables would most likely avoid showing an overt bias in their selections, which would be more prevalent in their close-ended responses (Drakulich, 2015). However, the open-ended responses provided an opportunity to elaborate on participants' thoughts and give an explanation for their selections, thus providing a more covert opportunity for bias to present itself. This could explain why the results did not statistically vary as hypothesized in the close-ended responses but showed some distinct patterns in the open-ended responses.

The second segment focused on the age and gender of the incarcerated parent's child; however, no statistical differences were identified related to the child's gender. Although there are no previous studies that suggest why there are a disproportionate number of boys to girls whose parents have lost their parental rights, I hypothesized that there may be an underlying preventative measure at play as an attempt to prevent boys from following with their parents' involvement in a criminal lifestyle (Harris-Mckoy, Meyer, Mcwey, & Henderson, 2014). The results of the present study do not support that assertion, so the underlying cause for this gender disparity remains an open question for subsequent investigation.

Although the child's gender did not seem to play as important a role as hypothesized, the child's age was relevant in both the quantitative and qualitative components of this study in that many participants did, in fact, focus their responses around the specific developmental needs of the child. The present findings reflect recent trends indicating that a disproportionately high number of younger children are removed

from their parents' care relative to older children, while also providing possible explanations for why this disparity might be encouraged within the criminal justice and foster care systems (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019; Macomber, 2009). Specifically, younger children's physical and intimate needs are viewed as more difficult for incarcerated parents to meet than are the needs of older children (Halter, 2018). Both the quantitative and qualitative findings of the present study reflect that notion. Additionally, many respondents cited 2-year-olds' inability to remember their parent as a motivating factor to have them placed with an alternative guardian or family, despite empirical evidence suggesting that this practice might be harmful to children (Fasah, 2018; Halter, 2018).

Finally, the third segment of the vignette focused specifically on the criminal activity of the incarcerated parent. The data support the hypotheses that parents who committed violent crimes are viewed as less capable of parenting and that they should have less influence in their child's life. Similarly, study results identified a belief that repeat offenders should have less influence in their child's life than first-time offenders. Surprisingly, however, no statistical distinctions were found in responses concerning parenting capability between those who read about first-time versus repeat offenders. This could indicate that incarcerated parents' character (more commonly associated with parental influence) tends to be assessed according to criminal history, whereas parenting capability is not. However, the incarcerated parent's repeat offense was one of the most commonly cited rationales given in the open-ended rationales, suggesting a potentially more important role than that described in the close-ended questions. This discrepancy is mirrored in the literature, with the number of offenses failing to correlate with parental

rights termination, despite the associated stigma (Harris-Mckoy, Meyer, Mcwey, & Henderson, 2014; Vesneski, 2011).

5.1 Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

This is one of the first studies to examine implicit attitudes, perceptions, and biases toward incarcerated parents based on their personal characteristics as well as the characteristics of their criminal activity in relation to their parenting abilities. However, as is always the case, this study had several limitations. First, although a true-experiment design, the incarcerated parent presented was hypothetical and it cannot be assumed that actual responses would be the same if faced with similar circumstances in a real-life setting. Second, CASA volunteers are only a portion of the team involved in determining either the maintenance or termination of parental rights. Future studies should involve other personnel involved in this decision-making process (e.g., guardian ad litem, judges). Finally, in the present study respondents were asked about components of the decision to maintain or terminate parental rights (i.e., parental capability and parental influence), but respondents were not explicitly asked to give a final recommendation concerning parental rights, and other components likely factor into the decision to terminate parental rights.

CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION

A true-experiment design to assess implicit perceptions and biases concerning incarcerated parents' ability to parent and influence their children's lives based on their race, gender, their child's age, gender, the crime committed, and criminal history failed to find complete support for all of the empirically-derived hypotheses. Thus, more research is needed to address the many unresolved questions in this body of literature regarding

the overwhelming number of parents in this country who have lost their legal parental rights. Further investigation is also necessary to inform interventions aimed at reducing the likelihood of stigmatizing or discriminatory practices in termination of parental rights actions.

APPENDICES

Appendix A



Appendix B

1. What race/ethnicity do you identify with?
 - a. American Indian or Alaskan Native
 - b. Asian
 - c. Black or African American
 - d. Hispanic or Latino
 - e. Middle Eastern
 - f. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 - g. White or Caucasian
 - h. Other (please specify): _____
2. Do you identify as
 - a. Female
 - b. Male
 - c. Other (please specify): _____
3. How old are you?
 - a. _____
4. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
 - a. Junior High School or less
 - b. High School/GED
 - c. Associate Degree
 - d. Bachelor's Degree
 - e. Graduate/Professional Degree
5. How many children do you have?
 - a. _____
6. Have you ever been convicted of a crime?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
7. Has anyone in your family ever been convicted of a crime?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
8. Generally, do you consider yourself a/an
 - a. Republican
 - b. Democrat
 - c. Independent
 - d. Other (please specify): _____
9. Generally, do you consider yourself to be
 - a. Very Religious/Spiritual

- b. Moderately Religious/Spiritual
- c. Slightly Religious/Spiritual
- d. Not Religious/Spiritual

Appendix C

Code	Definition	Examples
Importance of parent–child relationship	Referencing the importance or significance of the relationship between parents and children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's always important to maintain the relationship when possible. • No matter where the father is he should still be in child's life. • Children need their parents.
Decision-making	Referencing decision-making on the child's behalf	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She should have the opportunity to make parental decisions. • He should still be apart of medical or educational decisions. • She can't decide what's best for her child.
Physical presence	Parent's day-to-day physical presence in the child's life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children need a parent to be physically present. • He cannot provide for the physical needs of the child. • You can't be an effective parent if you're not there.
Relationship before incarceration	Referencing the relationship the parent and child held before incarceration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He has a history of being an active parent. • She has proven her ability to parent her child before being arrested. • The positive relationship in the child's early years will endure.
Communication or visitation	Ability to communicate or methods of communication (including visitation) while incarcerated, or lack there of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She should be allowed frequent visits. • They could remain in contact through letters and phone calls. • When one is in prison, communication is limited and difficult.
Child's needs	Referencing the child's general needs from a parent or guardian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He cannot contribute to the child's needs. • It should depend on the child's basic needs and wants. • The child may need more than their parent can provide.
Alternative guardian	Referencing the need for an alternative guardian or how an alternative guardian would impact the incarcerated parent's	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's always best for a child to be placed with family. • She can still live with relatives. • It would depend on the agreeableness of the child's other

	interactions or connection with the child	parent.
General parenting ability	General ability to parent given their incarcerated status and related barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is hard for a parent to influence a child from jail. • It would be difficult for her to be an active parent. • You cannot be involved in your child's life from prison.
Crime unrelated to child	Referencing that the crime did not involve the child, nor was it related to parenting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She has not been in trouble for her parental role. • The offense has nothing to do with his parenting ability. • He has had no legal issues with parenting.
Setting an example of what not to do	Suggesting the parent's crimes can be helpful in showing the child why or how to choose a different path	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help the child avoid making the same mistakes he has. • She could share her experiences and encourage her child to make different choices. • This could show the child that their actions have consequences.
Parent's character or judgment	Referencing what this crime does or does not say about them as a person or about their judgment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Her decision to commit the crime that gave her a 10 year sentence was a bad choice. • Just because she is in prison does not mean she is a bad parent. • He prioritized his illegal activity over his child.
Still a parent	Referencing the fact that they are still a parent or a parent regardless of the circumstances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He will always be their father. • A parent is a parent not matter where they are. • She should still be seen as “Mom” to her child.
Sentence length	Referencing the length of the parent's sentence or length of time away from their child	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She'll be in prison for a long time. • Such a lengthy sentence indicates a serious crime. • Depends on how long she will be incarcerated for.
Opportunity for second chance or rehabilitation	Referencing either the parent's opportunity for a second chance with their child, opportunity for personal rehabilitation, or suggesting the need for rehabilitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The point of prison is for prisoners to reform. • Hopefully he will learn from his mistakes for the future. • Everyone deserves a second chance.

Stability or permanency	Child's need for stability, permanency, or a constant figure in their life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The child needs a stable home. • The child deserves a full time parent. • Alternative placement for the child should be considered for the sake of permanency.
Love or emotional support	Referencing either the importance of love or emotional support or the ability to give love and emotional support while incarcerated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Just because she's incarcerated does not mean she no longer loves or cares for her child. • He can still be a supportive figure for the child and a source of love.
Child's age	Referencing the age of the child or specific time in childhood as a relevant factor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A 2 year old is completely reliable on an adult for everything. • A child at that age needs lots of guidance. • She would be an adult at the time of her mom's release.
Child knowing parent cares	Referencing the importance of the child knowing their parent cares or is involved in their parenting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is important for the child to know his dad has not abandoned him. • It is very harmful for children to believe their parents do not care for them. • The child needs to know he is supporting decisions made for them.
Involvement with drugs	Referencing the parent's involvement with drugs as being a relevant factor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drug dealers often associate with people who are potentially violent. • He has prioritized drugs over his child.
Not a good influence	Suggesting the parent is not a good influence on their child	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The chances that the influence is a good influence is now lower. • The nature of his crimes suggests he will not be a good influence for his child. • She does not need this kind of role model.
Child or parent's sex	Referencing the sex of the parent or child as a relevant factor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A teenage boy needs his father. • A young girl needs her mother.
Violence of crime	Referencing the level of violence (or lack of violence) as being a relevant factor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A violent crime indicates out-of-control behavior. • I believe a violent crime changes my outlook.

Number of offense	Referencing either the parent's first experience in prison, or that this is a repeat offense as being a relevant factor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repeated patterns of behavior. • This is his first time in prison.
Unknown motivation for crime	Suggesting the crime may have been committed out of necessity, giving the parent the benefit of the doubt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Her motivation to commit this crime for the first time is a determining factor. • Important to know why he was he in this market of selling drugs.
Not enough information	Not enough information to give any other justification	
Miscellaneous	Any responses that do not fit in existing categories	

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